

what they get is us: people who dance in praise of the Christ who brings justice, love, and mercy to a world hungry to receive them. And isn't that wonderful news?!

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

November 20, 2022
Christ the King Sunday
“What They Get is Us”
Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: Luke 1:68-79

This week, I was at my alma mater, Princeton Theological Seminary, for a preaching conference. At the opening worship service filled with rows of pastors of all ages, races, and denominations, the Rev. Dr. Kimberly Wagner offered a prayer. She prayed, “Sometimes people come looking for you, God, and what they get is us.” In the middle of the service, in the midst of the silence, that line of prayer was met with a loud, audible response! Some laughter, some shakes of the head and knee slaps, groans, a few applause, and some “my my my’s.” My row of nearly middle-aged women who I’d gone to seminary with choked back some laughs, perhaps so we didn’t cry. People do come looking for God. What they often get is us. We pastors feel the weight of those words. People are looking for God, for Jesus the Christ, for Christ the King, for the Holy Spirit, the giver of life and all the grace, mercy, and healing our God promises. And often, what they find on their search is regular people like us. Pastors know, perhaps better than anyone, that we humans are broken, imperfect, sinners. We do not have faith all figured out. We are so aware of the wonder and power of Jesus Christ. And we feel the weight of how hard it sometimes is to share the full glory of Christ.

Though Dr. Wagner’s prayer was delivered in a room full of pastors, her words are equally applicable to all Christians. Sometimes people come looking for God and what they get is you. A coworker is dealing with the death of a family member. They know you go to church. So they stop to talk, wondering what you might have to say in the wake of the loss. A friend is dealing with a scary diagnosis. She knows you pray. So she asks if you could pray with her. Even when they don’t know it, those people are usually looking for God.

What people on the hunt for Christ get is you and me. This is both the worst news and the best news. If people are looking for God and all they see is our brokenness or envy, our failure to love our neighbors, not to mention our enemies, then do they have any chance of finding God at all?

¹ Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco, Harper, 2006).

At the same time, the fact that people get us is the best news. Jesus said that we are his body on earth. Christ is king. But we are Christ's very body: in some mysterious way we are his flesh and blood, his heart and hands. We are the way he lives and moves on this earth. Which is wild, when you think about it! So if people come looking for God and they see us, then maybe that's just the way Jesus intended it. Indeed, his reign is far and wide, spanning from east and west, north and south, the whole world over. Christ is there, Lord of all, because of the people who are members of his body. When folks come looking for God, and they see us, it really is possible that they will see Christ.

It's important to believe in that possibility ourselves. The pastors in the chapel were struggling to have confidence in that truth. Yet I suspect that we reflect Christ more fully when we have some confidence that Christ is indeed visible in us.

When Zechariah's son John was finally born, and his voice returned so that he could finally sing his song of praise, his words were confident about the presence and power of Christ. It's funny, really, that Zechariah's words mostly celebrated the birth of the savior - Jesus - even though the occasion was the naming celebration of his own newborn son, John. When John was born, Jesus had not yet appeared on the scene. Mary was still pregnant. And yet, that piece of chronology didn't seem to matter to Zechariah. He was so confident in what God was bringing forth in a Savior, that it was as good as done. He didn't need to be timid in celebrating the news that God was sending a new ruler who would redeem the people. Luke also records the song of praise that Mary sang after the Angel announced to her the news that she would bear Jesus. Her words came out the same way as Zechariah's: as if God had already accomplished it. When it comes to what God is doing in the world, the way God is reaching out to save and love us, we can be confident that God's word is true.

Zechariah's song teaches us to have some confidence—mostly in God, and a little bit in ourselves. Like his song says, fulfillment of God's promise is coming, so we can act like it's already here. And when we do, our lives do point to Jesus the Christ. We do show him to those who are seeking him, and hopefully even those who aren't yet looking for him. Not because our lives are perfect, but because we experience and offer mercy in the midst of brokenness. Because we see light creeping into the shadows and we know what that means. Because we do not believe that death is the last word; because we are certain that when we get to the end, God's love is still there. We miss the mark sometimes. But we must also have confidence in

what God is doing, and therefore confidence in what we are doing to live into the reign of Christ our Lord.

Sometimes, a life and a movement clearly demonstrate God to the world. Archbishop Desmond Tutu's leadership against racial apartheid in South Africa did that. He especially showed God to those who might not have been so keen to notice the way Christ's reign is already breaking into the world. And he did it with the confidence of Zechariah.

When apartheid was at its worst and the world began to look down on South Africa, the government there began to shut down anti-apartheid political gatherings. So Archbishop Tutu said he would not host a political rally, he would hold a church service. At St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, worshippers came from all over the country to pray for God's deliverance. Police also showed up and surrounded the building, trying to intimidate those inside. When Tutu started to preach the word, many of the police entered the sanctuary, weapons drawn, and lined the aisles. Some were poised to write down or tape record his words so what he said could be held against him in court. Tutu was not afraid. Instead, he stopped preaching. He looked out at the police and spoke right to them: "You are powerful. You are very powerful, but you are not gods and I serve a God who cannot be mocked. So, since you have already lost, since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side." As theologian Jim Wallis, who was present at the worship service, writes, "He said it with a smile on his face and enticing warmth in his invitation, but with a clarity and a boldness that took everyone's breath away. The congregation's response was electric...From a cowering fear of the heavily armed security forces that surrounded the cathedral and greatly outnumbered the band of worshipers, we literally leaped to our feet, shouted the praises of God and began...dancing...We danced out of the cathedral to meet the awaiting police and military forces of apartheid who hardly expected a confrontation with dancing worshipers. Not knowing what else to do, they backed up to provide the space for the people of faith to dance for freedom in the streets of South Africa."¹

Tutu knew, like Zechariah, believed with his whole heart that God fulfills God's promises. Even though apartheid was still the law of the land, Tutu proclaimed with confidence that God's justice had already won. God has raised up for us a mighty savior in Jesus Christ, the ruler of all. Even in the hardest times, we can be confident that Christ gives light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. Tutu also knew how to celebrate the amazing news that sometimes, when people come looking for Jesus,